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NEWS

What Corzine learned in school: Iraq war touches even little kids

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 By **RICHARD COWEN**
 STAFF WRITER

There was time for only one more question. Sen. Jon Corzine was about to wrap up his chat with the children at Stony Brook School in Rockaway Township on Friday when 10-year-old Joey Parisi raised his hand.

"Do you have any questions for us?" the boy wanted to know.

The boy's question seemed to momentarily knock Corzine off balance. The other adults in the audience let out a gasp. Corzine brushed a hand through his beard and paused.

"Yes, I do," he said deliberately. "How many of you know someone who is in Iraq?"

More than a dozen hands shot through the air from among the about 75 children in the room.

Corzine's eyes widened. Another gasp, this one slightly louder than the one before, sounded in the room.

"That's amazing," said Corzine, a Democrat and one of 23 senators who voted against the Iraq war.

Corzine had come to Stony Brook School because the war in Iraq had already touched the children there, and he thanked the pupils for writing letters to American men and women serving in Iraq. Corzine said he delivered the messages during his trip to the war-torn country in early December.

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Also, one of the children's teachers is Nancy Patterson, the sister of Maj. Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, the head of the U.S. Army's 4th Infantry Division. That unit last month captured Saddam Hussein in an underground hideout beneath a farmhouse in northern Iraq. Also on hand at the school were the general's parents, Raymond J. and Helen Odierno, who are longtime Rockaway-area residents.

The visit came on a day when the Department of Homeland Security lowered the terror alert from orange to yellow - a sign that tensions had eased following the capture of Saddam. Yet the exchange between Corzine and the students was an even bigger reminder of how close the war is to home.

The senator noted that the road to peace in Iraq is dangerous and not at all assured. "We have to make sure that what comes after Saddam Hussein is not as bad," he said. "We have to be part of building something that is good."

He called Odierno a "hero you should all be proud of" - but also told the children they have also contributed to the war effort with their letters to America's troops.

"There is nothing more important that you can do than care for someone else," Corzine said. "Receiving those letters was extraordinarily uplifting for all of them."

The Odierno family seems to have been around Rockaway Township longer than its Green Pond. The general's father, now 83, has lived in neighboring Rockaway Borough since age 2. The couple has lived on the same street in town for 51 years. Daughter Nancy has taught in the Rockaway school district for 31 years.

The family has tried to keep a low profile since the morning of Dec. 14, when news broke that Saddam had been captured. That hasn't been easy.

"I got a call from my son's wife, Linda, around 6 a.m. that morning," Helen recalled. "I went downstairs to turn on the TV, and I peeked out the window and saw a news truck already parked in the driveway."

It wasn't until 11 that night that Odierno called his family. He didn't give them many details of the capture, and instead gave the credit to the men in the 4th Infantry Division. Then he reassured his parents that everything was OK.

"I think he rehearses that speech just to make me feel better," his mother said.

A flurry of media requests for interviews followed. The phone started ringing off the hook with calls from strangers, some of whom wanted to know whether they were related to America's newest hero. "We got

calls from all over the country," Helen Odierno said.

The Odiernos talked to some reporters who came to the door, but otherwise, shunned the publicity. They turned down a request to go on the "Today" show.

"We didn't want the limousine service and all that balderdash," Raymond Odierno said.

Odierno has told his family that he expects to return home in April. He doesn't want a hero's welcome.

"He just wants to come home," Patterson said.

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